DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 383 671 SP 036 011

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TITLE Context and Perceptions: Implications for Leadership.
PUB DATE Apr 95
NOTE 24p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Francisco, CA, April 17-22, 1995).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Effectiveness; *Administrator Role; Case Studies; Communication (Thought Transfer); *Communication Skills; Decision Making; Elementary Secondary Education; Interaction; *Interpersonal Communication; Leadership; Principals; Rapport; *School Administration; School Districts; *Superintendents; Teacher Administrator Relationship

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the patterns of interaction which enhance or inhibit administrators acceptance of their superintendent's agenda. The data were drawn from a case study of a superintendent involved in a change process, through observation and interviews with the superintendent, district administrators, and principals. Implications of the superintendent's and 22 administrators' differing views are discussed in the context of three questions: (1) what is the administrator's role in relation to the superintendent? (2) How does the administrator interpret the superintendent's role in decision making? and (3) What events define past interaction with the superintendent? Data indicate that the more the superintendent communicates concerns, desires, and hopes, the more individuals perceive their input as meaningful and/or accept the superintendent as the final authority. District office staff, whose opinions were solicited, almost without exception, accepted the superintendent's power and were active in supporting his agenda. By contrast, principals felt confused about the superintendent's thinking, perceiving that he showed little substance and did not seriously consider their input. The superintendent, in turn, only surmised their discomfort with personnel actions and did not recognize that his level of interaction with the community further engendered distrust in administrators. The evidence indicates that superintendents seeking organizational cohesiveness may need to focus specifically on high levels of social interaction. (Contains 22 references.) (ND)

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ED 383 671

CONTEXT AND PERCEPTIONS: IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA April, 1995

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CONTEXT AND PERCEPTION: IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP

INTRODUCTION

The education reform movement of the 1980's placed the responsibility for school improvement squarely upon the shoulders of the school principal. Understandably the site administrator must be viewed as the key player in any improvement process within the school. Less discernable is the rationale which supports the fact that the role of the superintendent has been, in the main, left out of the reform agenda. In fact, the literature on school reform "is largely silent regarding the role of the superintendent" (Schlechty, 1986, p.18). "Remarkably little attention... (is) given either to superintendents specifically or to district level operations" (Murphy, 1990, p.237). Some, (Tyack and Hansot, 1982; Wirt and Kirst, 1982) suggest that this omission is purposeful. They postulate that decades (1960-1980) in which superintendents, in general, exerted little or no leadership around a school improvement agenda warrant this exclusion. Thus the school district's chief executive officer role is limited to "authorizing and enabling" in most of the prestigious commission reports focused upon educational improvement.

Despite the general view that superintendents sanction and coordinate, Hill, Wise & Shapiro (1989) conclude that no improvement effort can succeed without an active school superintendent who **creates** a public mandate for improvement. Others assert that it is the "district administrator's task to increase the basic capacity of the system to manage change effectively" (Fullan, 1991, p. 191). "Who the superintendent is, what the superintendent values, and the style of operation supported by the superintendent will be manifest throughout the school system" (Schlechty, 1990, p.128).

SUPERINTENDENT'S ROLE IN SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

It is axiomatic that a school superintendent would like to improve school performance, raise public confidence and secure community support for the district's vision of schooling. It is less clear what the role of the superintendent in this process should be. Although the extant literature concerning superintendent behaviors in leading a reform effort is sparse, there is general agreement among researchers on several aspects of the superintendent's role in moving the district forward. Researchers concur that district leaders must be "visionary," they must see the bigger picture and should not be constricted by the dilemmas of the present in their conception of where the school district

should be headed. Moreover, they are compelling and inspiring communicators who spend much time educating the community about the vision they hold. Thirdly, they construct change strategies and postulate goals for moving the organization toward the preferred state while artfully negotiating the passage through the change process. And finally they direct much attention to nurturing the development of leadership in others (Hord, Jolly & Mendez-Morse, 1990; Schlechty, 1990; Paulu, 1989; Cuban, 1988; Murphy & Hallinger, 1986).

Fullan (1991) notes the enormous burden of communicating effectively, even predicting that success or failure of an innovation may be dependent upon the leader's ability as a two-way communicator. In the current era of "transformational leadership" the superintendent is viewed as the creator of professional dialogue (Pajak and Glickman, 1989), the one whose primary responsibility it is to educate the community by articulating a "compelling vision [which is] widely understood and embraced" (Schlechty, 1990, p.49). It is this necessity for continuous, widespread, even inspirational communication which is most broadly supported as incumbent upon a superintendent if a change effort is to move forward.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

THE DILEMMA

While theoretical conceptualization about communication involving one-on-one interaction abounds, little attention has been focused specifically on factors which may impact the support and cooperation of administrators for the superintendent's espoused agenda. Why, apart from considerations engendered by one's position on an issue, is one individual persuaded by the superintendent's words to collaboration, while another removes support or may even subvert the agenda? Why does communication fail to engender backing, even when the superintendent and administrator are verbalizing the same intention?

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY -

The initial focus of this study was the telling the story of one superintendent as he set forth an agenda for school improvement. How he perceives his intentions as he engages administrators in a change effort and how those who hear his words perceive his intentions became the heart of a final conversation the researcher had with the superintendent. His extreme surprise at his administrators' perceptions of him and his message caused the researcher to reexamine the data in an effort to explain how unprepared this astute and caring leader

was for administrators' expressed sentiments. This paper explores the patterns of interaction which, in this district, enhance or inhibit administrators' acceptance of the superintendent's espoused intent.

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

METHODOLOGY AND DATA ANALYSIS

The data for this article were drawn from a case study of a superintendent involved in a change process. The superintendent was chosen from among several identified as change agents by university professors and peers in the state. Referential nomination was the sole criterion. Over the course of eight months the researcher collected data while observing the superintendent at principals' meetings, cabinet meetings, board meetings, parent meetings, school staff meetings, and community based meetings. A qualitative approach to observation was used, employing non-participant observation as the primary tool for recording responses, in context, to social and professional interactions among administrators (Spindler & Spindler, 1985).

Additionally, the superintendent was interviewed on five separate occasions with discussion ranging from one hour to two and one half hours. Since it was agreed that the superintendent would have the final decision concerning the publication of the findings, he read the document prior to completion. This reading lead to the lengthiest and final discussion between the researcher and the superintendent.

Twenty-two administrators (nine district level personnel and 13 building level administrators), in addition to the superintendent, also participated in the interview process. An open-ended interview technique facilitated an exploratory and collaborative discourse. This proved crucial in revealing the subjective interpretation and individual modification of events which define how people perceive the world in which they find themselves. After several interviews repeated themes emerged and were coded for later analysis. While interviews followed a loosely structured format, both the superintendent and his administrators were asked, at the outset, "What has changed since Gil Traynor became the superintendent?" Inevitably, some version of "everything" was the response. Administrator interviews averaged almost two hours.

During and directly after each interview or observation session field notes were reviewed and analyzed. Later, recordings of the interviews added detail and provoked reanalysis. Occasionally, an incident needed to be recalled

at some distance from the occurrence itself and reliance upon memory was necessary. Analysis of the ethnographic concepts of structure and function (Fetterman, 1989), revealed role patterns which seemed to presage individuals reactions to the messages they heard the superintendent communicate. These patterns were coded, and subsequent interview sessions probed the subtleties and dynamics emerging within these behavioral patterns.

The major sources of document collection, used for information verification, were the press, the school district office, past board minutes and the superintendent's professional journal, kept in relation to an administrative development program. County newspapers were scanned for the full eight months of the study and information gleaned was discussed in subsequent interviews with all subjects.

Triangulation of data was achieved by reference to 1) interview data; 2) non-participant observation during which behaviors and activities were recorded; 3) content analysis of written documentation to corroborate or refute verbalized perceptions. A close scrutiny of transcripts, with the intent of discerning differences in interviewees perceptions about the same behavior/activity, dominated the final analysis.

FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

What emerged from the clutter was a glimpse into the perceptions of the superintendent as to what changes he intended, what he views as the focus of his activities, and what he believes he has accomplished. Mirrored back were the perceptions of the administrators whom he impacts and who impact him. A wholly unanticipated and singularly provocative outcome involved the superintendent's reaction to reading a draft of the research. That the superintendent did not anticipate administrators' often negative perceptions might suggest either a lack of awareness about the culture, a lack of concern for it or lack of skills. None of these appears to be an accurate explanation. The superintendent cares greatly about his district. And he has been professionally and personally involved with the staff he now leads for 14 years. He is full of hope, and he is full of good intentions. He is equally skilled, following carefully articulated processes to facilitate change. Nonetheless, this man engendered insecurity and frustration, and earned the appellation "dictator," among a majority of administrative staff. The revelation was both disturbing and enlightening to him.

This final and unanticipated exchange was revealing to both the superintendent and researcher. In every instance, absent specific information, administrators perceived the

superintendent's actions differently than did the superintendent himself. And, in this last conversation, the superintendent, confronted by administrators' sentiments, found himself in a similarly discomfiting information void. In this environment, much as Allison (1971) noted about the Cuban missile crisis, "where you sit influences what you see as well as where you stand on any issue" (p. 178).

THE STORY

THE MAN

Born and raised in the mid-west, an active church goer, involved in a long term marriage, Gil Traynor[1] fits Carson's (1972) profile of the typical superintendent in all ways except age. Traynor is in his late 30's, young for a large district superintendency. He has however followed the typical career path, having been a teacher and a principal prior to serving as superintendent. To date he is considered "place bound" having experienced all his educational roles in the same district.

Gil Traynor is a superintendent whose leadership style reflects the model for superintendents noted by researchers. He has, in most ways, attempted to put theory into practice as he attempts to move his district from its current state to a preferred one. More specifically, Mr. Traynor does, as Schlechty (1990) and Cuban (1988) suggest, serve as chief educator in the community, cultivating relationships with "outside" power brokers. Furthermore, he has made multiple efforts to "get the message out [and assure that it is] delivered and heard" (Schlechty, p. 102). He is, according to an overwhelming majority of those interviewed, the "inspired and compelling communicator" which many of the theoreticians cite as necessary (Fullan, 1991).

According to all parties, this superintendent is the quintessential communicator. He is alternately referred to as "silver-tongued," "loquacious," and "articulate." In his own words, he tries "to avoid being the superintendent for stuff and things" and to put primary emphasis, in his communications and actions, on the children and their learning. To a large degree, Traynor has "followed the rules" for optimizing the possibility that change will be implemented and adopted. He established policies in conformity with his

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[1]Gil Traynor is a pseudonym. All references to people and places have been altered to assure anonymity.

Board of Education, set forth goals which were widely communicated, established a process for district and school site improvement, and monitored progress (Griffin, G. & Chance, E., 1994). Yet it is a discrepancy between his articulated intentions and routine behaviors, and the perceptions toward these of his administrative staff, which appear to have given Mr. Traynor the greatest challenge in advancing his agenda. As he and others interviewed noted, his "leadership style is creating consternation."

THE DISTRICT

West Beach School District serves approximately 15,000 students. It is considered an affluent district although there is great disparity of socio-economic factors between the eastern and western sections of the county. The superintendent prior to Mr. Traynor retired from the position after 21 years in office. The district is considered to be relatively stable and the community is supportive of its schools. Recent change initiatives appear rooted in efforts to move away from two decades of sameness, as embodied in the person of the previous superintendent, rather than from a sense of definable dissatisfaction.

Gil Traynor has been the superintendent for three years. Traynor feels that his leadership agenda focuses on better education for students. As a result, West Beach teachers, principals and district administrators are prodded, urged, cajoled, and manipulated to examine and alter the structure of schools and schooling.

THE EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES

Gil Traynor's primary goal, according to his own often repeated words, during his first three years as superintendent, was the "improving of student achievement." Toward this end he established three objectives and had a fourth thrust upon him: 1)"create an administrative team, centrally and at the building site, that is competent and balanced;" 2)"market" the school district in the community; 3)create a "school improvement process" and, 4)"put out fires," both long burning and newly ignited.

Like the emperor in the Brothers Grimm fairy-tale, Traynor was persuaded by the loudest and nearest voices that his agenda was accepted. Upon reading the study, as initially agreed to, he was completely taken aback by administrators' negative assessments. Initially, the superintendent said, the document "had an emotional impact... - it really did. I read faster and turned the pages faster hoping and praying... and I finally ran out of pages..." He went on to explore the

stages of his reaction and the resultant impact upon his professional persona:

> I picked it up expecting it was going to be some of what it was, but with a happy ending... [there was] an overwhelming feeling of disappointment that (he trailed off here); I know how much consternation I've created (pause) for administrators (pause) I can't tell you that part of it surprised me. It didn't. ...I know a lot I've done has created outright disdain, feelings of distrust, discomfort... I think what was overwhelming was there appeared to be so little on the positive side... I believed even my greatest detractors would be able to say more positive things than they did.

And later:

> [I] put it down scared to death - devastated - not personally, but in view of the impact on the district. Scared I was hurting the organization by hurting these administrators ...my immediate reaction was: 'Dear God, the very thing you were trying to nurture you're killing.'

He knew, he says, that some were disenchanted. What he did not apparently know was how deep or how widespread this disenchantment was. "Part of what came out of my reading," reflected Gil, "was very positive...a lot of what I read gave me a good feel that maybe I have to look at my style... [people] don't understand what I'm doing and I need to think about [that]."

CONTEXT

Much of the mixed reaction to Traynor's leadership style is traceable to three contextual variables: a) sweeping administrative changes made by the superintendent; b) the superintendent's penchant for engaging in community outreach, and c) the implementation of an effective schools process which included site based decision making.

What follows is a discussion of the superintendent's articulated beliefs as to how and why he initiated the activities noted above. His eloquence concerning his rationale is juxtaposed beside the perceptions of central office administrators and those of site-based administrators concerning these same initiatives. Patterns of interaction and how these impact perceptions are then teased out of the data.

THE SUPERINTENDENT'S PERCEPTIONS

Administrative Changes

Gil Traynor had been in the district 14 years prior to his appointment as superintendent. Many in the school community shared his perception that an "old boys network" existed in the district. There was also a public perception that "there are too many administrators." High on Traynor's agenda was breaking up the "network" and he saw the mandate for a leaner central administration as the way to achieve that. He cut "20 administrators in 3 1/2 years" and feels that in spite of this the perception that the district is "top heavy just does not go away." In a district where, according to one director "the previous superintendent moved one or two [administrators] in 16 years, Gil moved eight in one year."

Traynor's rationale for this administrative movement speaks to "inheriting 15 principals" at different levels of skill and commitment; of initiating an effective schools process that demanded skills some principals had, others could learn, and some would never acquire. He spoke of the need to "mix and match administrative personalities to get different strengths on individual [school] campuses."

> ...I've always recognized the fact that principals are key to this whole thing... I wanted them to know they would have a good deal of training... [but] I knew it meant changing some principals and assistant principals [to] provide a balance, [so each site would] be diverse personality [and skill] wise...it's taken me three years to [achieve] that.

He "whittled away [at the district level] bureaucracy" because of what he perceives as his "hands-on" style of leadership and suggests that too many layers had been built between the superintendent and the instructional process. "The new organizational chart makes every director responsible to me directly." And, "the old guard" as Traynor and others call them, had to have their roles altered. "There was an undercurrent of undermining that went on out there regularly... and the administrators told me about it." They'd been the "godfathers... kings... and I wanted to break the mold... replace anointing [and reward] with a process" that considered equity and the needs of the position. Thus, there were retirements, changes in titles, and the naming of a Deputy Superintendent. His explanation:

> ... I don't believe in ownership of a job but rather that an individual works for the district and they will be put in a job that is best for the whole district....

> [Administrators] know I've gotten rid of a lot of people in the last couple of years... it's had a disquieting effect. [The former superintendent] was notorious for not getting rid of people. Ever! He'd move them downtown to the elephant's graveyard.

Community Outreach: aka Politics

It is Traynor's perception that listening to the public and attempting to meet their needs should be of paramount concern to the superintendent of schools. As long as you keep the bottom line "the kids" there is, in Gil's mind, only gain to be gotten in the political arena. He is whole-heartedly engaged in the political end of the superintendency, even viewing it as his "favorite part of the job." He regards himself as a politician and enjoys the camaraderie of other politicians.

Moreover, because of what he perceives as a "Vatican mentality" established in the previous superintendent's long term, the education arena was considered off limits to all but professional educators. Gil Traynor was determined to alter that perception. "As a labor of love" he engaged the community in the schools and himself in the community. "I've got some pretty good press over the last couple of years" and, he points out, it has resulted in some rewards for the school system. His actions and words confirm that he views politics and education as inseparable.

The Committee Process

The implementation of a "school effectiveness process" which incorporated a site based decision-making model was the center piece of the superintendent's vision for improving teaching and learning. A "leadership team" representative of the full spectrum of interests was pulled together by Gil shortly after he became superintendent. A consultant was hired and "based on refinements of that team's thinking" two pilot schools were selected to implement an effective school process (ESP). A year after the establishment of the pilots, the superintendent, with Board approval, mandated ESP throughout the district.

From the superintendent's perspective, the establishment of committees was a necessary step to reduce the clout of the "old boys" and to establish a process that "gets all the stakeholders involved." Gil says that he wants those "in the trench level to have control of their school community." Speaking of ESP and the committee process, the superintendent reasons that changes must germinate at the school site level. "We want it (ESP) to be whatever they create out there."

On behalf of ESP the superintendent requested and received "planning days" from the board. He also achieved agreement around a process that allows schools to request waivers from board policy in the interests of ESP. And the principals' evaluations, after two years of implementation, will soon reflect their facilitative skills in this process.

DISTRICT ADMINISTRATORS' PERCEPTIONS

Of nine district office administrators only three retain the position they held with the previous superintendent. One has been "elevated" to the position of Deputy Superintendent. A second, the dissenting voice throughout, is considered to have been "demoted." The third has retained her position and in harmony with the remaining central office staff echoes Gil Traynor's praises.

Administrative Changes

District level staff, save one, unanimously like and respect the superintendent and clearly understand and support most of the administrative changes which he has initiated. The explanation for the alteration of some district administrators' roles, as given by these central office personnel, precisely reflects the explanations stated by Gil Traynor.

David Gray, a pragmatic, central office administrator, perceives the current administrative cadre around Gil as "highly capable, motivated individuals... a new breed of people, supportive, professional educators who understand education needs total reform."

District level administrators echo Gil consistently. One assistant superintendent admires the administrative changes resulting from Traynor's leadership style. As a leader, she says, he is "hands on...he likes to be in on things." She explains his management style as "get the message out and count on others to make sure all the details get done." This, she says, accounts for the need he saw to "reshuffle" central office administrators.

Martha Sales, widely thought to be the "best administrator" in the district, calls the administrative changes "fruit basket turnover." While she admits that it caused "immediate problems," there is now, in every school, an "effective team... there are no district jokes anywhere [because] there are incredible administrators everywhere." Roxanne Paige, another director, is equally laudatory concerning the reassignment of principals. She too sees it as

a design to create an "administrative team at each school site [in which] the principal and the assistant principal complement each other."

Community Outreach: aka Politics

In interviews with 22 school administrators in the West Beach School District, perhaps the most often repeated phrase about Gil Traynor was that he is a "political animal" or, "he's the ultimate politician." His most ardent supporters and vicious defamers used these phrases to describe him.

Once again, central office administrators were overwhelmingly pragmatic noting that politics is "what he does for a living." While some site based administrators understand and approve of his community outreach, those at central office applaud the opportunities which have accrued to the district as a direct result of Gil's involvement with the larger community.

There is a kind of reverence among district level staff for the political skills Traynor displays. While some of the words and phrases used to describe his activities might connote distaste, all save one, were clearly patting him on the back for his astuteness in the political arena. As example:

> ...every decision is weighed politically; it's PR in the system and outside

And:

> [He's] got to worry about all the political implications. It's not just what's the most effective way to do this it's what's the most effective way to do this that [he] can get away with; that people will let [him] do.

Yet another district level administrator perceives the pragmatic implications this way:

> My strong recommendation [about the budget] was to be more aggressive... I know why he didn't do it. He... can't look like he doesn't care about teachers and kids... he has to walk a fine, fine line.

A memorable interpretation was provided by one administrator who felt he was making positive statements about the superintendent when he referred to him as the "ultimate politician" in an early interview and subsequently elaborated:

> Gil will tell you exactly what he thinks you want to hear... he wouldn't out and out lie but there are ways you can say things. Let's say he's not above misleading people... it's nothing sinister, it's what the man does for a living.

One of his most ardent supporters at the district level, speaks about Gil Traynor the politician thusly:

> Sometimes he'll make a decision that is more politically sound than educationally. You have to respect that. After all, he is a political animal by the nature of the job.

The Committee Process

Perhaps no issue so dominated the administrative agenda as site based decision making. On the issue of the committee process and input into the superintendent's decisions, district and site administrators' perceptions are similar. It is however, the acceptance of the superintendent's intentions and the positive spin which district administrators put on it that is significant.

Bill Peterson, Brian Nelson, and Marlene Perry, all in central office, perceive that "he is a committee person." Peterson believes Traynor is "definitely into government by committee" and although at first he tried to imitate the former superintendent's style (of one on one decision making), Traynor has more recently developed a cadre of individuals whom, according to Peterson, he trusts and listens to.

Nelson, in a second interview, noted that "Gil is thoughtful [and does] work through committees" but, Nelson suggests, and most in central office echo the belief, that the superintendent's motivation for the committee process involves giving "employees the sense that they have input, and in fact they do have input, he does listen." Nelson's shared thinking included:

> Committees in West Beach School District are mainly for show. We use it as a (sic) opportunity to say 'hey, you had input.' 90% of the time we're going to do what we want to anyway. That's what we get paid for.

SITE-BASED ADMINISTRATORS' PERCEPTIONS

The images presented here reveal a tangle of current events, and histories. The variation in perception and impact appears as complex as the human beings involved. As Fullan (1991) has stated "the real crunch comes in the relationships between... new programs or policies and the thousands of subjective realities embedded in people's individual and organizational contexts and their personal histories." While misperception is standard in organizations, in this setting individual differences, most notable in the level of comfort with the superintendent's words and activities, were marked.

Administrative Changes

On the issue of administrative changes there is a palpable difference between what the district level administrators perceive and the perceptions of the site administrators. School building administrators speak often, some with marked caution, of the personnel changes Gil made early in his tenure. Of 13 site based administrators interviewed only two spoke positively of his actions in this and other areas. And both, Peter Foumai with 11 years in the district, and Lois Marsh, with 21 years in West Beach, feel an allegiance to him because, as one said, "he represents the leadership in this district." Hard pressed to find any real weakness in their boss, both refer to Traynor's efforts to "match personalities up in buildings." Foumai suspects that "others do not have a clue." Administrators' security was threatened when "the sacred cows who knew their jobs" says Foumai, "lost those jobs." With a pleased grin he says:

> That left nearly everyone out at the building sites in a frenzy of insecurity. On the surface, that was hardball. No one in the [district] is <u>not</u> now worried about getting fired.

The vast majority of site administrators were basically unhappy with the changes. As one elementary principal said, because "nobody sat down with us and said would you like to do such and such... instead we were told 'I need you to do this (change school sites) so you will do it'." Several stated that they are not able to express their mind to the superintendent. They fear that disagreeing with him will result in the loss of their position.

Community Outreach: aka Politics

Principals and assistant principals, almost to a person,

present compellingly similar reactions to Traynor's early efforts in the "political arena." "He did not come in as a savior" they insist, and "he was not on a particular crusade; he was open and upbeat." Again and again these administrators praised the system that Traynor was taking over, perceiving there was little need for change. One assistant principal suggested "there may have been a change agenda around labor relations and good old boy practices." Another went so far as to confirm that Traynor had a "vision for the schools... a take off on Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream'." One principal summed it up this way, "all the administrators were supportive... he advocated for 'establishing better communication, streamlining and looking at the total child'." Overall these administrators remember being hopeful about Traynor as the school district's in-coming leader.

Three years later however, the majority of site administrators feel he is too political and believe he puts politics above education. Only a few say they recognize politics as one of his jobs. Principals' and assistant principals' comments on Gil Traynor's "political style" reflect ambivalence. They appear uncertain as to whether to condemn or applaud it. Some are visibly angry at the amount of time he spends away from the district on what is perceived as political business. A few call it necessary though, given a choice, they'd rather have him "at home." They perceive his traveling out of district and even his extended involvement in community affairs creating gaps in the educational process. When he is away, many observe there is "no one" to turn to for help. Decisions, say some principals and assistants, are made in Gil's absence and then reversed upon his return. They, like district administrators, use the term "political animal" but where district administrators reflect awe, site administrators sound a harsh, negative tone. Assistant principals are most pejorative in discussing the superintendent's political role.

Only a few have continued to support the superintendent in his community outreach efforts. Peter Foumai, one supportive principal, suggests that the superintendent would "<u>never</u> compromise his educational values.

> I believe he makes the correct educational decision... I do not believe, with all my heart, that Gil would make a political decision that's not educationally sound... he's a master politician but a true educational leader.

While grudgingly granting worth to the superintendent's community involvement, the vast majority of site administrators feel that his activities in this arena have caused the "educational process" to suffer.

The Committee Process

Where district level staff accept the symbolism of the committee process, site administrators disdain what they feel is a charade. There is little if anything verbalized by principals that even hints at the committee philosophy Traynor presents. All but two principals closely echo the sentiment that committee efforts are all show and very little substance. One secondary principal comments that:

> There's a lot of enthusiasm in the community for committees. And we add to committees and we add to committees.... [But] it's not a real forum for real issues to be heard. It's a public arena and Gil will shut you down.... You get bogged down in discussions and [you have to] come up with something that fits for instant replay.

Another principal voices the conviction that the committee system is meaningless and serves an underlying political purpose. This principal feels:

> ...everybody is involved in something that leads to a recommendation or suggestion for change. But those recommendations don't often seem to become part of the ultimate decision... this perception needs to be changed. ... [People] think it's a lot of lip service.

One assistant principal succinctly summarizes the sense that Mr. Traynor's investment in committees is all show and no substance when she claims that, "staff feel (the committee process) is nothing more than a way for Mr. Traynor to get his doctorate."

The vision and goals which provide the direction for these site teams have been verbalized in multiple arenas. Board minutes support the fact that Gil Traynor introduced the idea of broad based input into decision making during his first Board presentation. Rarely was a group gathered in which the superintendent did not reiterate his vision for school improvement and the role of committees in this process. Still, site administrator after site administrator point to the fact that they do not know what his agenda is, or what real purpose is served by a committee structure. These principals and assistant principals, reflecting on the committee process say:

> I think he has a goal...he is very goal oriented...but I don't know what [the goal] is.

If we have a plan as to where we're going in the county... I don't know it. It's not clear.

If we knew what he was looking for we [wouldn't] have doubts and inconsistencies... we can only sit back and hope

With Gil you don't know why he's going to do it or what he is going to do. Where are we trying to get to?

Traynor agrees that at the outset he did not communicate, in a consistent and patterned way, where he envisioned the district heading. Once he remedied this many still remained deaf to his words. As Traynor noted "you could tattoo the vision on some people's foreheads and they'd still say 'what vision?'"

IMPLICATIONS: THREE STRANDS

Overall the superintendent perceives himself as an open, input oriented leader, noting that "[administrators] feel they can question anything and everything."

The majority of district staff verbalize the notion that "Gil [has an] overwhelming desire to know everything... to be in control." This assessment is most often accompanied by a smile of acceptance that, in the end, Traynor makes all the decisions.

Most site administrators' perceive Gil Traynor to be a "dictator." Again and again their words define Traynor's behaviors as autocratic, closed, political or vague.

Reconciling these different views came to be arranged as strands in answer to three questions. These questions emerged during data analysis. The answers to these questions hint at why administrators, in this setting, interpret the superintendent's words and actions as they do and what implications these interpretations have for the degree of support given this superintendent.

A. What is the administrator's role in relation to the superintendent?

1. <u>The Proximity Principle.</u> An opportunity to "have a voice" in the decision making process did not necessarily solicit genuine participation. Pattern and regularity of communication mattered more. Individuals whose interactions with the leader occurred in a naturalistic

setting, as opposed to a formalized communication network, felt greater affinity with the man and his decisions. The offices of these individuals were almost exclusively located ir the central office within a short walk of the superintendent's office. Two exceptions involved principals who had previously served on a building administrative team with the superintendent. It was evident that this past relationship approximated the one district administrators currently experience.

2. Symmetry of relationships. Administrators' images of their role were honed by the amount of time the superintendent spent with them in relation to a particular issue, on whose turf the interaction occurred, and at whose behest. Again, central office administrators had the advantage. Formal meetings were, for half of these administrators, balanced by frequent "drop-in" encounters initiated by either party. Although issue centered, moments of light banter, laughter, and feet on desk ease were noted.

In contrast, "drop-ins" with principals, an activity confined by the superintendent's sensitivity to the multiple ways his visit might be perceived by faculty, staff and the principal, were rare occasions. Moreover, as he was inevitably interrupting something and could only be given a moment or two of the building administrator's time, these encounters were very brief. Thus, almost all substantive interactions between the superintendent and a principal were formalized. Within that context analysis of the data indicated more positive interactions with the superintendent when discussion occurred in the principal's office as opposed to that of the superintendent. There were limited examples of principals requesting a meeting with the superintendent. Individual principals who initiated this type of contact generally felt a high level of professional and/or personal comfort with the superintendent. Perhaps comfort was derived from information shared during these conferences. Perhaps, for those who did not initiate discussion, those with the lowest level of comfort, no such benefit could be obtained.

B. How does the administrator interpret the superintendent's role in decision making?

1. Perceptions of Power. District office personnel voiced clear understanding that the superintendent was the final authority. Two principals, who were uniquely supportive, each verbalized this same understanding, noting that leaders have ultimate decision making power.

However, many site administrators felt their input was not valued when the superintendent decided on a path of action contrary to their suggestion. There was, in their thinking, an expectation that committee input equaled decision making authority. There appeared to be an equation established by these administrators' between hearing opinions and following advice. The result of this misperception appears to be a basic distrust of the committee process. It was never fully verified that the superintendent had in fact shared his desire not to relinquish decision making authority in many areas. Although Gil Traynor was insistent that he concurred with site level decisions, against his better judgment, in order to be supportive of the site-based decision making model, this was apparently not significant enough to be mentioned by any building administrator.

Without exception, individuals who voiced acceptance of the superintendent's positional power, speaking of him as the "final authority; the boss," indicated in substantive ways, support for his agenda. What is observable in West Beach is that issues of power and communication, especially in relation to the superintendent's personnel actions have multiplied the impact of the "cardinal fact of social change ... that people will always misinterpret and misunderstand some aspect of the purpose or practice of something that is new to them" (Fullan, 1990, p. 199).

2. Professional development. Those administrators whose interaction with the superintendent began with a belief that their input was of value and that they had an equal voice in the final decision tended to remain aloof when the leader's choice did not mirror their own. However, three of these individuals found themselves in closer contact with the superintendent at a later date. This proximity engendered more intimate connection with the decision making process and more respect for its dilemmas. Each expressed a new understanding of the lengthy process, and the burdensome nature of being the final decision maker. Each claimed new "respect" for the superintendent, and a growing disinclination to carry ultimate authority in a decision making process.

C. What events define past interactions with the superintendent?

1. Long shadows. Emotions were deeply touched and staff factionalized by actions around personnel. The shadow of these emotions, almost two and one half years after the event, still caused administration to question the superintendent's motivation in all subsequent change

efforts. With only two exceptions building administrators did not understand the superintendent's thinking or purpose as regards multiple personnel changes. Apprehension, was evident and attributed, in discussion, to the superintendent's actions toward previous administrators.

The equanimity displayed by district administrators and two principals is attributable, in Gil Traynor's opinion, to the fact that they are skilled professionals, not threatened by potential position changes. Their acceptance of personnel shifts may however be related to the level of communication they experience with the superintendent. Using words similar to those of the superintendent, each discussed the leader's motivation for the personnel changes. Almost to a person there was an implied sense of conceit in being the superintendent's confidante.

2. Transactions between equals. Without exception administrators who have been persuasive and caused the superintendent to change his mind are convinced he is a man of reason. The perception that the superintendent is "fair and he'll listen" follows an experience of having persuaded him to alter his course. "Convincing the superintendent" appears to have long term residual effects in terms of subsequent support.

3. Grudging acceptance. Efforts that succeed, as in the matter of effective schools and site based decision making, marginally alter perceptions about leadership. A majority of administrators regard ESP implementation, three years into the process, as "worthwhile." Where it was initially regarded as "superficial" or "cosmetic" or even "self-serving for the superintendent and the Board," it is now viewed as "carrying more than its weight" and "going very well... as a tool for getting what (building staff) want." Success is attributed to almost anything but the superintendent. Nonetheless, one senses ambivalence, in some, in denying the superintendent some credit for progress made. How this will color their perceptions of future efforts is a story that remains to be told.

FINAL THOUGHTS

This study did not attempt to evaluate the success or failure of a district "reform" agenda. Nor was it the purpose of this study to assess the superintendent's abilities, or lack of them, as a change agent. Rather, how people think about their situations, and what they feel, is considered an

entry point when attempting to determine the way individual's perceptions and predispositions for action are formed.

Implications for change agendas are evident. In the West Shore School District personnel actions clouded the superintendent's credibility among the majority of staff, years after the actual event. His publicly acknowledged reasons for the changes were never accepted by most listeners.

Community outreach, a passion of the superintendent, caused ambivalence among staff. Feelings of abandonment engendered by the amount of time he spent engaged in community and state outreach, coupled with the negative impact of personnel decisions, badly eroded administrators trust in Gil Traynor. The business of politics was very new to staff and was never a topic of open dialogue between the superintendent and the majority of administrators.

A lack of early and explicit clarification around the delegation of decision making authority caused confusion and further erosion of trust. Committee members assumed, absent specific information to the contrary, that their decisions would determine superintendent action. When this did not materialize they frequently cited these discrepancies as proof of his insincerity.

The unanticipated event of an "ethnographic intervention" provided the superintendent with cause for reflection that may precipitate unforeseen interactions with administrators.

Data indicate that the more the superintendent communicates concerns, desires, hopes, the more individuals perceive their input as meaningful and/or accept the superintendent as the final authority, the more supportive these individuals feel about his decisions. In the case of central office staff, opinions were requested, structures around this discourse were informal and allowed for time, candor and trust. Parties shared thinking and weighed the ramifications of a variety of proposed solutions. Almost without exception, these individuals accepted the superintendent's positional power and were active in supporting his agenda.

By contrast principals felt confused about the superintendent's thinking, perceiving that he shared little of substance, and did not seriously consider their input. Legal limitations on full disclosure, coupled with time constraints, and physical distance negatively influenced the superintendent's communication with site administrators. He in turn only surmised their discomfort with personnel actions and did not recognize that his level of interaction with the

community further engendered distrust in administrators.

Finally, evidence indicates that efforts to impact perceptions must be viewed as a systemic phenomenon which considers the primacy of communication. Superintendents seeking organizational cohesiveness may need to focus specifically on high levels of social interaction, while recognizing that these are greatly impacted by spatial relationships.

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